

STAYING THE COURSE: A MODEL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAM THAT GOES THE DISTANCE

The Educational Leadership Master's Cohort Program at Delta State University was redesigned in 2011 to reflect current industry standards and streamline the program. Since its inception in the mid-1990s, the program has provided a nationally acclaimed model for principal preparation. The recent redesign focused on preparing school principals to provide leadership for continuous school improvement in an era of stringent accountability and diminished resources. The program description allows program planners at other universities and colleges to consider program elements that may enhance school leadership preparation at their institutions. The program is applicable to both rural and urban settings.

For well over a decade, the Educational Leadership Cohort Program within the College of Education at Delta State University has prepared leaders for schools within the storied Mississippi Delta, noted for its extremes of poverty and wealth, as well as its rich alluvial soil and intricate culture associated with the blues and the arts. The program was initiated by the College of Education in the 1990s in response to an environmental scan, which identified a declining K–12 educational system in the Mississippi Delta, reflective of the generally low socioeconomic conditions pervading the area. The plight of area schools spotlighted the need for effective and change-oriented school leadership. Visionary leaders extending from the State Superintendent of Education to the Dean of the College of Education, legislators, and local school superintendents recognized that a major shift was in order. These stakeholders, guided by national experts, reviewed the current scientific literature of the era to conceptualize and implement a program that called for a bold initiative to undergird the manner in which school leaders and principals were being trained in the state. As a result, a cohort model was designed to bring together a cluster of candidates identified as having leadership potential to take a leave of absence from the classroom and commit to a 14-month, full-time program (LaPointe, Darling-Hammond, & Meyerson, 2007). Although the program has undergone continual revision consistent with the dynamic nature of curriculum, the cohort model has been sustained since its inception. A state sabbatical leave program was established in 1998 and has been continually funded since that time through legislative appropriations to the Mississippi Department of Education, enabling candidates to make this commitment. The model was founded upon the premise that theory without intense and ongoing practical application within a clinical setting (i.e., the school site) is limited in its ability to translate into effective practice.

The program has successfully prepared school leaders each year since its inception in large part due to its flexibility with respect to changing contextual factors that affect both candidates and the schools they ultimately serve. In recent decades the Mississippi Delta region and the schools which service the region have changed dramatically in several respects. Depressed socioeconomic conditions continue to prevail, compounded by a declining population. According to the State of the Region Report by the Mississippi Delta Strategic Compact (encompassing 18 Mississippi Delta counties), the population in this region has declined 9.34% since 2001, while the State of Mississippi experienced an overall growth of 3.99% for the same period (Mississippi Delta Strategic Compact, 2011). From 2001–2010, the Delta Compact Region suffered a 7.1% decrease in overall jobs in various sectors, while the state benefitted from an overall increase of 2.6% in jobs. Further, in 2009, 59% of households in the region were headed by single mothers, compared with 44% for the same group statewide (Mississippi Delta Strategic Compact, 2011). These indicators underscore the drain of human and financial capital and the entrenched poverty that directly impacts schools within the region.

With the general decline of the Delta, the mandate to provide quality educational leaders becomes urgent. Current literature on effective schools is clear: quality leadership and quality teachers are essential for schools to be successful in preparing students. In turn, educated citizens are essential to growing a strong workforce and “contribute to the economic viability and quality of life in Delta communities” (Delta State University, 2010, p. 1). Therefore, essential to the viability of the region is the “continued development and retention of high quality leaders and teachers ... imperative to improving the health and achievement of students in the Delta area where many low-achieving students and most of the underperforming schools in Mississippi are located” (Delta State University, 2010, p. 1).

Given that the literature emphasizes the link between quality leadership and quality schools, it is important to note that the excellence of the Master’s Leadership Cohort Program at Delta State University has been acknowledged nationally by several organizations. In 2006, a study commissioned by the Wallace Foundation and conducted through Stanford University identified the program as one of the top eight educational leadership programs in the nation. The study cited the following as contributing to the program’s success: components of the program that reflect scientific literature findings; program graduates who exhibit proficiencies associated with effective leaders; and financial support to sustain the program (LaPointe, Darling Hammond et al., 2007). As these researchers reported, “other schools’ programs offered important components such as internships, cohort structures, close partnerships with local school districts, and integrated curricula. However, few that we examined put these pieces together as comprehensively or as consistently well as the Educational Leadership Program at Delta State University” (LaPointe, Davis, & Cohen, 2007, p. 1).

The Leadership Cohort Program was chosen for the state's first Institutions of Higher Learning Best Practices Award in 2006. Further, the program was cited at the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) annual conference in February 2010 by Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, who commented, "I want to be clear that it doesn't take an elite university to create a fantastic principal preparation program. Delta State University in Mississippi, and the University of San Diego's Educational Leadership Development Academy, have also been singled out as top-notch programs" (p. 77). The program has been highlighted in *Our Children*, Education Week, the Delta Business Journal, and Southern Regional Education Board materials. Two program graduates have been named Milken Award Winners, while numerous others have been named Principal or Administrator of the Year for the State of Mississippi.

After two decades, the program continues to boast a retention rate that reflects success. A review of the most recent follow-up data for program graduates revealed the following. Seventy-nine (79) candidates have graduated from the Leadership Cohort Program in the past six years (Cohorts VI–XII). Of this number, 74 (94%) remained in Mississippi schools as of the 2010–2011 school year. Of the graduates remaining in Mississippi, 69 (87%) are working in Delta area schools. Of those working in the Delta, 50 are in administrative positions, while 19 are employed as teachers eligible to fill future administrative vacancies. Additionally, the five graduates employed in Mississippi, but outside of the Delta region, are working in administrative positions; four of them are in districts identified as "critical needs" due to a shortage of highly qualified teachers (Delta State University, 2010).

Historical Context

The evolution of the current Master's Educational Leadership Cohort Program may be best understood with a brief stage setting relevant to conditions in the Mississippi Delta that led educational leaders at Delta State University (DSU) in the early 1990s to build a better program for the preparation of school leaders. Further context is provided that chronicles social, cultural, and economic conditions in subsequent decades that shaped the current Master's Cohort Program. Throughout these decades, the consideration of context is a consistent theme, as is the need for responding to school districts with the provision of capable leadership. This consideration of context has been and continues to be a critical factor in preparing candidates to work in regional school districts. Therefore, it is only natural that helping candidates to understand that education is culturally contextualized, requiring both an understanding and appreciation of the diversity of all individuals within the learning community, is a strand of the College of Education Conceptual Framework (Delta State University, 2012) as well as a critical dimension of the Leadership Program's anchors (Moorman et al., 2011).

Consider first the social, political, economic, and cultural forces at play in the decades leading up to the 1990s. National attention was drawn to the Mississippi Delta's Quitman County in the 1960s when visits by the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1964 and U.S. Senator Robert Kennedy in 1967 called attention to conditions in this area. Quitman County was one of the poorest counties in America in the 1960s and remains so (U.S. Census, 2011). The visit was the impetus for Rev. Dr. King's creation of the Poor People's Campaign, a movement to raise awareness of the need for nutritious food, jobs, adequate housing, and non-discriminatory treatment for predominately black families living in poverty. After his visit, Senator Kennedy drew national attention to the issue of childhood hunger and malnutrition, which brought better access to free school lunches and breakfasts and to food stamps (Cass, 2010). Eventually, Pulitzer Prize winning journalist Julia Cass visited Quitman County in 2008 to provide updated information on improvements and continued challenges. Cass found that the "basic safety net" (p. 5) constructed over 40 years ago is still helping families living in generational poverty, as well as newly poor families who lost jobs and homes during the recession of that time period. She also found that many children remain in poverty, with 98% of the students in the Quitman County public schools qualifying for free or reduced price lunches. At the high school, Cass was impressed with the atmosphere of civility and order, but also identified an aging physical plant, a shortage of certified teachers, and low test scores and graduation rates. About 30% of the high school graduates go to college, with the majority attending local community colleges while the rest typically attend a historically Black state university. Those who do not graduate from high school remain in poverty with marginal jobs or a life-style supported by illegal activity that often leads to prison (Cass, 2010).

Improving academic achievement in the Mississippi Delta public schools continues to challenge teachers and administrators. Based on the 2010 accountability results, 11 of the 27 (41%), of the state's "Failing Schools," the lowest level on the accountability scale, are located in the Mississippi Delta. On the other hand, 9 of 53 (17%) of the "Star Schools," the highest designation, are also located in the Mississippi Delta. The Star School information is deceptive because seven of those schools are located in Desoto County, a middle-class suburb of Memphis, Tennessee; only two (out of 53 in the state) "Star Schools" are located in high poverty Delta counties, and both of these are magnet schools that draw their student population from across the school district. Clearly, the call for exemplary administrator preparation programs is a strong one that requires vigilance and responsiveness to the changing forces that influence schools.

Program Evolution

As introduced previously, in the mid-1990s thoughtful program planners at the university level, the State Superintendent of Education,

legislators, and vested school superintendents, all cognizant of the challenges facing the rural Delta region, embarked on the development of a leadership preparation program linked to professional standards. The standards reflected the role of practice and the dynamic nature of school leadership, tenets which would greatly influence the experiential nature of the program. It was also during this time period that the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NBPEA), chaired by Dr. Joseph Murphy, created the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC), whose members set forth ISSLC Standards for School Leadership (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008).

Program faculty along with nationally recognized educational leadership reformers, a local school district task force, and several collaborating universities networked through meetings to build a strategic plan for restructuring the leadership development program. In addition, in 1995 the Mississippi Department of Education, the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning, and several Mississippi universities, including Delta State University, formed a statewide collaboration for the purpose of changing leadership preparation in Mississippi. This collaboration reinforced the new model of restructuring the Delta State University Leadership Preparation Program Initiative, and Delta State University submitted this proposal in March 1997.

The approved proposal led to the creation of Cohort I of the Master's Leadership Cohort Program, which began in June 1998. The program focused on the preparation of assistant principals and principals and was founded on three cornerstones of program design. These cornerstones were a collaboration and partnership between local school districts and the university, an instructional design that embraced the concepts of teaching and learning as a leadership outcome and model of application in the preparation process, and an integrated field based development process that supplied the instructional design of the preparation program. The vision of the leadership preparation program was to develop the instructional and leadership skills and behaviors of participants to a functional level that would enable graduates to assume an entry school leadership role and make a significant contribution to the improvement of educational programs and outcomes in local school districts in the Delta region and Mississippi. The three interrelated program anchors were teaching and learning, organizational effectiveness, and school and community (Delta State University, 1997). The reconceptualized program was delivered by program faculty with practical experience as school leaders and scholarly knowledge of leadership, organizational, and adult learning theories.

During ensuing years, the program has remained true to its course, while evolving in response to research and best practice. When, in 2011, the Mississippi Department of Education requested that state universities with leadership preparation programs examine their curricula and practices in light of industry standards, program planners stepped up to the plate eagerly and with confidence. The faculty, division chair, and a national

consultant examined the program in depth in light of an extensive review of current literature and research. Program anchors were redefined, curriculum was developed around the anchors, and program assessments were refined to more tightly reflect the outcomes desired of candidates. The program was also streamlined from 14 to 13 months and 48 to 39 hours to focus on salient curriculum features and experiences and bring the program in line with similar programs in the state and nation. The nationally acclaimed reviewer identified by the Mississippi Department of Education rated Delta State University's plan as excellent and as one of the best he had reviewed in over twenty years of doing so. A detailed description of the redesigned program follows.

Program Description

Overarching Framework Utilizing Cohort Model

The current program (approved in 2011 by the Mississippi Department of Education) focuses on scaffolding learning experiences for candidates over the course of a 13-month, 39-hour program with delivery of curriculum through a progressive approach providing rigorous content and experiences at the foundational, developmental, practice, application, and mastery levels. The program continues to employ the cohort model, with candidates supporting one another while moving through the program as a group. With the cohort model, all candidates begin the program of study on June 1 of each year and complete the program on June 30 of the following year. The cohort model is superior in its ability to provide a supportive learning community for candidates where common and diverse learning experiences provide substance for rich discussions. Though challenging in terms of scheduling and the intense time commitment required of candidates, the cohort model allows for shared experiences, intensive field experiences interspersed with discussion, and meaningful connections among classes and experiences. Program planners identify these as some of the advantages over the typical parttime program with course offerings spread over a two to three year period.

Conceptual Framework

The early phase of the redesign focused on identifying and developing a conceptual framework, which would drive all curricular and program changes throughout this process. Within the conceptual framework, a research-based theory of action evolved that would focus and leverage “beliefs and values about effective teaching and learning, organizational capacity, and the socio-political context of the students’ families and communities, all used by leaders for learning to positively impact student learning” (Moorman et al., 2011).

From the theory of action, the previous program anchors of teaching and learning, organizational effectiveness, and school and community were redefined to reflect current research and literature about what effective principals should know and be able to do with respect to impacting change and continuous improvement in schools. The new program anchors that emerged were curriculum, instruction, and assessment (CIA); leading operations for learning (LOL); and continuous improvement and a culture of learning (CICL). With the three new program anchors, a foundation was provided for the development and refinement of content and instructional modules within the program. The revised core anchors focus emphatically upon leadership for learning oriented toward accountability for student outcomes, building individual and organizational capacity to achieve a powerful vision of student learning, and engaging and responding to the community.

Ultimately, the concepts of each program anchor were infused into the development of new course syllabi that defined the direction of learning goals and outcomes in each identified course. The curriculum, instruction, and assessment anchor is the primary anchor in the curriculum and focuses on the elements of effective teaching and learning; the second anchor, leading operations for learning, focuses on organizational leadership processes that promote effective and efficient use of appropriate human, fiscal, technological, and physical resources to positively affect student achievement; and the third anchor, continuous improvement and a culture of learning, is designed to help candidates understand and be able to use data to drive decision making for continuous improvement in the areas of student achievement and school operations. Additionally, this anchor focuses on the cultivation of relationships within the school and community that result in successful partnerships with parents, stakeholders, and various agencies.

Course of Study Progression

Program candidates begin their intensive coursework with two academic courses in the first of two four-week summer terms, followed by two academic courses in the second term. One course within each summer term is a core course that is required of all graduate level students; however, special sections of the core courses are offered to cohort members exclusively, fostering an environment in which discussions of content can be tailored specifically to the program's learning goals and outcomes. The other course within each summer term is foundational and focuses on theory-based leadership styles and practices, as well as models and processes to facilitate effective change to drive improvement. In the fall semester, candidates complete six hours of coursework and internship hours. During this time instruction focuses on the content from the foundational courses and requires candidates to further develop and apply their knowledge and skills in the area of instructional leadership practices. The spring semester

consists of six hours of coursework and two internships with a sustained focus on application of instructional leadership practices, while developing capacity in the areas of effectively leading operations for learning and leading and supporting continuous improvement for a culture of learning. During each of the fall and spring semesters, candidates return to campus for five to ten days of concentrated coursework after each internship. A culminating course in the final summer term allows exiting program candidates the opportunity to demonstrate acquired knowledge and skills in program curricular areas while facilitating and leading the transition of new program candidates who are entering their first summer of study.

In addition to the progressive learning stages provided within the cohort model, the opportunity for candidates to develop strong personal and professional relationships with fellow cohort members throughout the duration of the program is evident in feedback gained from current candidates, graduates, employers, and reviewers outside of the program. Deep and trusting relationships between the candidates and program faculty have also been cited as a key component for maintaining the cohort model; with these collaborative relationships, feedback between program faculty and each individual candidate is viewed in a positive, constructive manner when monitoring and directing progress and growth toward learning goals. Positive relationships are essential between the candidate and program faculty, especially considering that many of the program assessments are performance-based and require candidates to receive direct input from the program faculty and principal mentors. This promotes the successful integration of theory-based instruction and field-based experiences.

Internship

A program strength that has long been a hallmark feature of the program is its three twelve-week field-based internship experiences in an elementary, middle, and high school setting during the regular school year. An additional one-week central office internship is completed during the spring semester of the program. Candidates, principal mentors, and superintendents consistently identify the intensive internship experiences as the backbone of the program. Candidates are supervised by trained principal mentors and serve four full days each week at the internship site and return to campus one day each week. National reviewers of the program, graduates, and employers have consistently noted that the prescribed experiences within the respective internships provide candidates with the needed background to perform the duties and responsibilities of a principal upon exiting the program.

The internship experiences account for nine hours of the candidate's coursework and are integrated with the once-a-week classroom experience on the campus. It is a requirement that each candidate be placed with a principal mentor who has been appropriately recruited and trained by the pro-

gram coordinator. Mentors are selected based on the demonstration of high moral and ethical character and an overall professional disposition, qualities that will contribute to a positive learning experience for the candidate, the principal mentor, and the program. Principal mentors are also required to participate in all training activities relevant to the supervision of an administrative candidate, as well as have an outstanding background in curriculum, instruction, assessment, successful operations of a school, and establishing positive relationships with stakeholders in the school and community.

The partnership established by the school district and the university creates a win-win situation in which candidates get authentic training and schools grow future leaders knowledgeable of their needs, often resulting in candidates being hired by mentors or to work at internship sites. Once administrative candidates are placed in an internship, the principal mentors work collaboratively with candidates to guide their learning experiences while also assisting them in fulfilling a detailed, but not exhaustive list of specific, ISLLC standards-based internship activities. These activities are related to coursework and based on the program curriculum anchors. The candidates are required to complete all items on the list in each internship and must provide a written narrative to program faculty for review, which explains their depth of understanding about each item, as well as include evidence or artifacts supporting completion of each activity.

Along with completion of the internship activities, progress toward additional stated learning goals throughout the internship is monitored by program faculty, with assistance from the principal mentor. Detailed feedback is provided to the candidate to make the necessary corrections or adjustments to account for growth over the 13 months. Mentor principals are also directed by program faculty to use their own discretion in providing site-specific activities and additional administrative experiences that are relevant and appropriate for the grade level, school, school district, or community. Program faculty work with the principal mentors to supervise the candidates during each 12-week internship and the one-week central office placement through site visits, telephone calls, e-mails, and mid-term and summative mentor evaluations of the candidates.

Recruitment, Application, and Selection

Each individual who enters the program engages in a rigorous recruitment, application, and selection process. The program is designed to accept a maximum of seventeen (17) candidates and no fewer than eight (8) candidates. Through targeted recruitment efforts, program faculty identify a pool of quality applicants based on a desired candidate profile aligned with program goals. The ultimate goal is placement of the most highly qualified and best prepared leaders in Mississippi Delta schools. Each potential applicant must have a strong desire and possess the ability to: (a) serve as a school leader of learning; (b) provide effective leadership

in the often challenged, low achieving, and poverty stricken Mississippi Delta schools; and (c) be successful in the curriculum and internships offered through the program (Moorman et al., 2011).

Traditional and focused recruitment strategies are intended to identify candidates who will reflect the characteristics of a quality school leader as defined within the vision, mission, and foundational principles of the program. Traditional recruitment strategies include informational mailings to school districts, superintendents, and principals, as well as information mailed to candidates in response to their queries. E-mail recruitment blasts are conducted using a promotional flyer with program and contact information sent to all school districts and superintendents. Word of mouth among current and past program candidates, as well as school superintendents and other school district administrators, remains a most valuable means of sustaining interest in the program. Through partnership with the Teacher Education program faculty at Delta State University, high performing teachers and graduates of the teacher education program are identified and strategically recruited as potential candidates (high performing teachers include those individuals who have demonstrated outstanding leadership abilities, are National Board Certified Teachers (NBCT), or have received other accolades). Utilizing the university website for program updates, applications, and photographs, as well as other university social networks to publicize and promote the program proves highly beneficial to focused recruitment strategies. While recruitment strategies are ongoing, focused recruitment strategies leading to the start of the application process begin in late October of each year and culminate with the interview and selection process in early April.

Potential candidates who have shown a strong interest in applying to the program must have the support and recommendation of their local school district superintendent. Each candidate is then required to submit a prescribed and detailed application portfolio for consideration and review by a team consisting of program faculty from Educational Leadership and Teacher Education, program graduates, and area superintendents and principals.

The interview, application, and selection process consists of two phases. Phase I contains five components which must be met by all applicants and includes the following: (a) evidence of having taken the Graduate Record Exam (GRE); (b) evidence of having completed a writing component (GRE Analytical preferred with a required 3.0 or higher to move forward); (c) evidence of a 2.75 undergraduate grade point average on qualifying undergraduate work in teaching or related field; (d) a structured resume with required components set forth in the program application; and (d) three letters of professional reference (to be followed by telephone conferences with appropriate references). Evaluation rubrics are used to score each component of Phase I; candidates are ranked and then moved forward accordingly to Phase II of the application process.

Phase II consists of a structured interview process and is conducted by the review team cited previously. During the interview, prospective candidates are asked a series of prescribed questions structured to ascertain candidates' knowledge and background related to foundational principles and effective curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Specific questions are designed to reveal the candidate's desire to become a school leader. A commitment to high moral and ethical standards for themselves and others must be demonstrated during the interview process and is done so through responses to scenarios presented by the panel. An interview guide, interview evaluation rubric, and overall rubric are used to chart progress during both phases of the application and interview process.

Candidate Assessment and Performance

Candidate performance is assessed through the use of eight key performance-based assessments that are aligned with the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 and the 2002 Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership. While the eight assessments are a primary data source for tracking candidate growth and progress, additional assessments, both formative and summative, are embedded in coursework that is aligned to support the learning goals and outcomes stated in each course syllabus.

With the internships comprising four days of each week for a total of 36 weeks over the entire program (with a minimum of 1,152 total internship hours), it is by design that the assessment of individual candidate performance is primarily based on experiences from each internship and the weekly day of instruction on campus. Supplemental assignments to enhance learning and support progress on the performance-based assessments are provided during intense on-campus course sessions between internships, via e-mail or online assignments, and through assigned readings of professional journal articles, books, book chapters, or research studies about the current instructional topics. Through the constructivist theory approach, it is the expectation of program faculty that candidates are active participants in their own learning through research methods and other forms of inquiry.

Clinical Correlations and Administrative Intern Performance Assessment

Two of the eight key performance assessments, the Clinical Correlations and the Administrative Intern Performance Assessment, are largely dependent on the internship experience and require completion at each internship site. The Clinical Correlations are based on real experiences that occur while the candidate is in the internship. There is a set format for completing each of 12 Clinical Correlation papers at each of the 12-week internship sites. The Clinical Correlations must demonstrate an alignment with

the appropriate ELCC/ISLLC standards based on the situation, provide a vivid narrative description of the situation, address any legal or ethical issues or state accountability standards that may apply to the situation, discuss possible alternative actions that the principal could have taken, and include a reflection on the situation and what the candidate learned. The Administrative Intern Performance Assessment relies primarily on feedback from the principal mentor at the conclusion of each internship. The instrument is aligned to each of the ELCC standards and performance elements for which the principal mentor provides a candidate rating. Principal mentors are also asked to rate the candidate on 24 items to provide insight into the personal characteristics and dispositions of each candidate in areas such as professionalism, punctuality, appropriate attire, and teamsmanship.

School Leaders Licensure Assessment

The School Leaders Licensure Assessment (SLLA), developed and administered by Educational Testing Services (ETS), is a nationally normed assessment based on the ISLLC 2008 Standards and is designed to measure whether or not entry-level principals and other school leaders have the standards-relevant knowledge believed necessary for competent professional practice. The SLLA has been required by Mississippi as part of the licensure process for school administrators since 1999. Since its inception, candidates of each of the Educational Leadership Cohorts have completed the SLLA. Since the ISSLC and ELCC standards are aligned, this assessment provides evidence of a candidate's proficiency on the ELCC Standards as well. The four hour SLLA is organized into two sections. Section I consists of 100 multiple-choice items and is administered over a time frame of two hours and twenty minutes. Section I contains multiple-choice items measuring the ability of the candidate in the areas of vision and goals, teaching and learning, managing organizational systems and safety, collaborating with key stakeholders, and ethics and integrity. Section II consists of seven constructed-response items administered over a time frame of one hour and forty minutes. The seven constructed-response items require the candidate to analyze situations and data, to propose appropriate courses of action, and to provide written rationales for the candidate's course of action.

Currently, a minimum score of 169 on the SLLA is required for school administrator licensure in Mississippi. The minimum score of 169 is the highest of any state in the United States. In the last five years, the Mississippi Department of Education has changed the minimum score three times, moving the minimum score through 2007 from 154 to 165 in 2008, to 167 in 2009, and most recently to 169 effective January 2010. Candidates from each of the 13 Delta State University Educational Leadership Cohort Programs have completed the SLLA. In September 2009, ETS introduced a new format of the SLLA that continues to reflect can-

didate performance based on the ISLLC 2008 Standards. Since the program's inception, 169 of 172 total program candidates have passed the SLLA on their first attempt, resulting in a 98% first-time pass rate.

Since program inception, 169 of 172 (98%) students have passed the SLLA on their first attempt. From 1999–2007 the mean score was 176, the median was 177, and the range was 161–192. These scores represented a 100% pass rate for licensure and were well above both the state and national average. Students in the program continue to perform well on the SLLA with a median score of 181 and a mean of 179 for the years 2008–2011. Overall the scores continue to increase and to exceed the state and national averages.

Challenges

Funding

In 1993 a strategic plan was developed for funding the master's educational leadership cohort design. A partnership was formed between Delta State University and the Delta Area Association for Improvement of Schools (DAAIS), a consortium comprised of Mississippi Delta public schools and parochial schools. From 1998 through 2006, the partnership received funding through a grant from the Delta Education Initiative (DEI), providing financial support for faculty salaries, faculty and student travel, textbooks, and supplies. Since the program required students to commit to full-time student status, scholarships were particularly critical to the success of the program. The Mississippi Department of Education School Administrator Sabbatical Program enabled school districts to continue to pay candidates their salaries during the 14-month program, and DEI provided additional scholarship funding. Delta State University allowed the tuition to be waived for all students. Since 2006, funding has been provided in a similar fashion by the Delta Health Alliance, a collaborative of regional health service and educational agencies funded through the Health Resources and Services Agency (HRSA). While the Mississippi sabbatical program and the DSU tuition waivers continue to be critical aspects of program success, current economic and funding pressures will assuredly cause program planners to look for creative ways in which to continue support for the program.

School Districts

Economic constraints upon school districts have also presented a challenge for superintendents faced with reducing faculty and staff, making it difficult to release teachers to the program with the assurance that their jobs will be secure upon their return after completion of the 13-month program. Additionally, some superintendents have voiced concern that it

becomes a morale issue to have faculty losing positions through budget cuts while others are being provided a sabbatical to pursue their education.

Professional Development for Sustainability

The turnover rate of administrators in the field presents a challenge for program planners who must continually educate them regarding the model and earn their buy-in. Without the support of area district school administrators, promising candidates do not have the environment or the support to avail themselves of the program. The same is true of other stakeholders such as legislators and state school leaders: their support is tantamount to the sustainability of the program supports in place (i.e., state sabbatical leave program, community partnerships, others).

Generalizability

Although a description of this model program would not be complete without considering its context and mission, it is significant to note that it has broad application for other universities and colleges with principal preparation programs. The basis for its success is the strong commitment stemming from a partnership between an educational institution and the school districts it serves. While this strong regional identity is rural, the leadership skills developed within the program are predicated upon industry standards and could be applied in any region where a strong partnership can be forged between the university program and school districts. Further, the commitment to analyzing the context of the service area is applicable and beneficial to all regions and one that bodes well for program planners wishing to adapt the model. The program is particularly advantageous for areas with disadvantaged populations, whether rural or urban. Schools in such areas should benefit from the program's comprehensive and intensive approach to leadership development with a focus on understanding contextual factors and relationship building and its emphasis on continuous school improvement based on data analysis.

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Leslie L. Griffin is the Dean of the College of Education at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

Thomas R. Taylor is the Program Coordinator of the Master's Program in Educational Administration and Supervision at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

Lynn W. Varner is the Program Coordinator of the Doctoral Program in Professional Studies at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

Carole L. White is a Program Coordinator of the Educational Specialist Program in Administration and Supervision at Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.